

CONTESTING CLOTHES IN COLONIAL BRAZZAVILLE¹

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AFTER a gruelling six months' journey from the Gabon coast, Savorgnan de Brazza approached Mbe, the capital of the Tio ruler, Iloo, in August 1880. In his record of the day, Brazza relates how his guides suggested that he and his men change their clothes, 'for the Makoko is a very great chief'. To be taken seriously as the representative of an equally powerful ruler, the European must dress appropriately. Brazza quickly donned the dress coat of his naval uniform while his men 'took off their rags and put on their sailors' uniform'.² At the royal court, Makoko Iloo appeared in the regalia of a Tio ruler. As Brazza described him:

He wore a large copper collar, as did his principal wife. Four pages carried a folded red cloth on their shoulders. A young man, chief of the pages, wore a uniform acquired through trade which he wore with the buttons at the back. The ruler wore a large cloth (*pagne*), rings around his ankles and arms, and an intricately embroidered hat fastened to his head by an iron pin with two very long feathers attached.³

While such momentous meetings were hardly the stuff of everyday life, the symbolic importance of cloth and dress in mediating social relationships also pervaded the mundane experiences of ordinary people. Throughout the region that became French Equatorial Africa, clothing and accessories were little associated with utilitarian needs, since neither climate nor work conditions made them necessary. Rather, dress conveyed identity, status, values and a sense of occasion.

The association of power with wealth, ostentatiously displayed, was deeply entrenched in equatorial African societies from earliest times. Jan Vansina in his recent book on the 'peoples of the forest' has noted the etymological connections between wealth and leadership.⁴ Furthermore, in his study of the Tio who dominated the Brazzaville region in the late nineteenth century,

¹ I am grateful for the comments on previous versions of this paper that I have received at several seminars. I would particularly like to acknowledge the comments of Paula Girshick, Joseph Miller and David Robinson. Research for this paper which is part of a book-length study on *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* was funded by Fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Philosophical Society and Indiana University.

² Henri Brunschwig, *Brazza explorateur: les traités Makoko, 1880–1882* (Paris, 1972), 52.

³ *Ibid.* 53. On the regalia of the Tio ruler and chiefs, see Gilles Sautter, 'Le plateau Congolais de Mbé', *Cah. Ét. Afr.*, 1 (1960), 35–7; and Jan Vansina, *The Tio Kingdom of the Middle Congo, 1880–1892* (London, 1973), 386–8.

⁴ Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests* (Madison, 1990), 100.



Fig. 1. The Makoko Iloo, from a sketch by Charles de Chavannes, 1884. Reprinted from Charles de Chavannes, *Avec Brazza: souvenirs de la Mission de l'Ouest Africain, mars 1883-janvier 1886* (Paris, 1935).

he has noted that 'to become wealthy was a compelling dream for wealth and power were one'; and that 'the greatest differences in the standards of living between people were seen in their personal appearance, in clothing and jewellery, thus the wealthy and the chiefs could show who they were'.⁵

This tradition took different forms in different areas. In the less differentiated societies of the equatorial forests, few clothes were worn, but jewellery, bodily decoration and elaborate coiffures signified social distinction.⁶ In the more highly stratified societies of the Tio and Loango kingdoms, elaborate clothing was a visible reminder of status. In seventeenth-century Loango, foreign visitors marvelled at the prestige raphia cloth worn by powerful

⁵ Vansina, *Tio Kingdom*, 159, 307.

⁶ See, for example, E. Froment, 'Un voyage dans l'Oubangui', *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie de Lille*, xi (1889), 196, 199; and Jean Dybowski, *La route du Tchad: du Loango au Chari* (Paris, 1893), 152-5. See also Gabrielle M. Vassal, *Life in French Congo* (London, 1925), 115-24; André Gide, *Travels in the Congo* (Paris, 1927; Berkeley and Los Angeles, reprint 1962), 51-2; Maurice Briault, *Dans le forêt du Gabon* (Paris, 1930), 153-6; Raymond Bafoutela, 'Étude morphologique et vestimentaire sur le groupe Bondjo de la Likouala', *Cahiers Congolais d'Anthropologie et d'Histoire* (hereafter CCAH), iv (1979), 21-38.

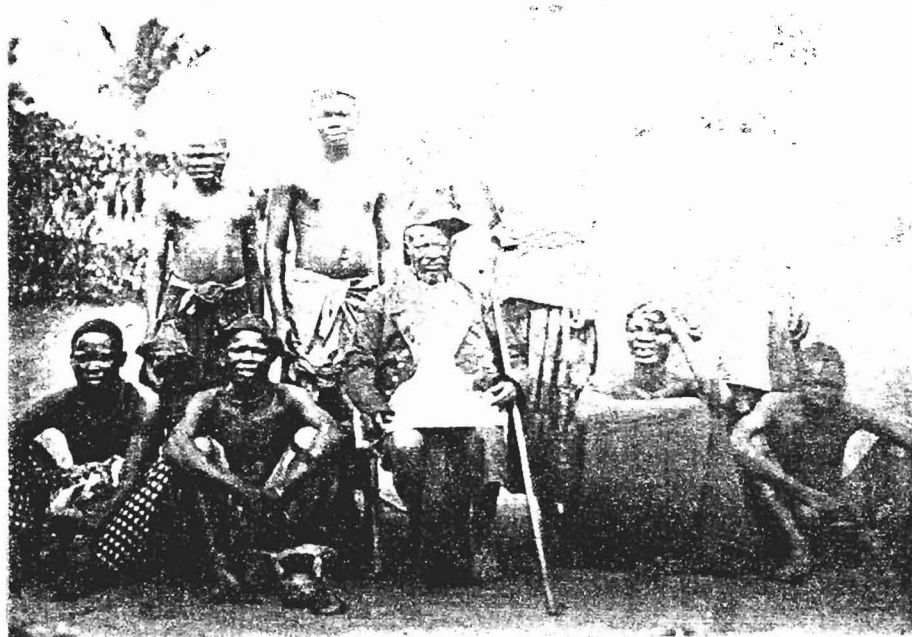


Fig. 2. Chief of Linzolo (30 kms south-west of Brazzaville), 1896, wearing braided hat and coat. *Source:* Photo Collection, Archives of the Holy Ghost Fathers, Chevilly.

individuals, likening it to velvet, taffeta, satin and damask.⁷ Specialized royal weavers produced cloths which might be worn only with the ruler's permission, while lesser-quality cloths were worn by ordinary people. Among the Tio, as Brazza found out, elaborate raphia cloths, jewellery and special insignia conveyed membership in dominant families. Dressing well in fine raphia clothes was not only aesthetically pleasing. It was also a true display of power since the cultivation of trees, the processing of threads and the weaving of cloths represented an investment of labour that only big men could control. Elders could manipulate power through the circulation of raphia cloth, which they distributed judiciously to juniors and dependents who lacked cloth or the means to acquire it.⁸

From the seventeenth century, access to European and East Indian textiles by Loango Coast slave traders was a key factor in the rise of entrepreneurs

⁷ E. G. Ravenstein (ed.), *The Strange Adventures of Andrew Battell in Angola and Adjoining Regions* (London, 1901), 69; S. P. Naber (ed.), *Sam Brun's Schiffarten* (1624) (The Hague, 1913), 9–10; Olfert Dapper, *Naukeurige Beschrijvinge der Afrikaensche Gewesten* (2nd ed., Amsterdam, 1676), 149–51, 157–8. For similar descriptions of the dress at the Kongo court, see Willy Bal (ed.), *Description du royaume de Congo et des contrées environnantes, par Filippo Pigafetta et Duarte Lopes* (1591) (Louvain, 1963), 36–7; and Théophile Obenga, 'Habillement, cosmétique et parure au royaume de Kongo', *CCAH*, IV (1979), 21–38.

⁸ For a fuller discussion of this point, see Phyllis M. Martin, 'Power, cloth and currency on the Loango coast', *African Economic History*, xv (1986), 1–12.

who successfully contested the dominance of established rulers. Old and new clothing traditions coexisted, symbolizing the changing bases of power. Powerful men wore animal furs, leopards' claws, copper jewellery and other traditional marks of status together with the finest European trade cloth, which was worn around the waist or chest like raphia cloth wrappers. Powerful trading families distributed imported cloth which trickled down to be used by most people who lived in the coastal hinterlands by the early nineteenth century.⁹ In the 1880s, European travellers noted that cheap cottons from Manchester were driving local raphia cloth off the market in the Pool region, along the right tributaries of the Congo and on the Tio plateau.¹⁰

As imported trade cloth became more widely dispersed among common people, the powerful appropriated exotic clothing and accessories to underline their distinction. Social differentiation was thus maintained through the rarity of goods.¹¹ Writing from the struggling French post at Brazzaville in 1885, Brazza noted that in dealings with powerful individuals, 'it is necessary to give them something that no one else has ... old clothes, especially bright colours, lace or braided coats, hats and helmets'.¹² In Loango, vivid evidence for the integration of foreign and local dress exists on carved ivory tusks sold by local craftsmen to visiting sailors and traders in an early tourist trade. In scenes of daily life that spiral around the tusks, porters, traders, hunters, farmers and artisans go about their business dressed in imported *pagnes* and such ready-made items as shirts, hats and jackets.¹³ Photographs, sketches and descriptions by Europeans show that military caps or top hats were especially popular among chiefs, interpreters and successful traders.¹⁴ Hats of various styles were status symbols long before Europeans showed up in pith helmets. Among the Kongo, appointment to an office was accompanied by the presentation of an embroidered cap sewn from pineapple fibers. A chief in the hierarchy had the title of *mfumu a mpu*, or 'chief of the cap'. For the Tio and the Kongo, the word for hat, *mpu*, also denoted political power.¹⁵

⁹ W. F. W. Owen, *Narrative of a Voyage to Explore the Shores of Africa, Arabia and Madagascar* (New York, 1833), 173.

¹⁰ Vansina, *Tio Kingdom*, 274; Robert W. Harms, *River of Wealth, River of Sorrow: The Central Zaire Basin in the Era of the Slave and Ivory Trade, 1500-1891* (New Haven, 1981), 47, 63-4, 89. Raphia cloth did not disappear in the twentieth century, however, since it remained in use for work clothes and for special occasions such as initiation ceremonies. For a recent revival in its use, see, Jean-Michel Delabeau and Sylvain Ngoulou, 'Le tissage du raphia en pays Kukua: de l'industrie à l'art', *CCAH*, x (1985), 45-51.

¹¹ Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher, 'The language of personal adornment', in Justine M. Cordwell and Ronald A. Schwarz (eds.), *The Fabrics of Culture: The Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment* (The Hague, 1979), 9-10.

¹² Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Brazza et la prise de possession du Congo* (Paris, 1969), 401-2.

¹³ Sketches of these tusks can be found in E. Pechuël-Loesche, *Volkskunde von Loango* (Stuttgart, 1907), 76-7; also see photograph in Jan Vansina, *Art History in Africa* (New York, 1984), 131. Also see Sigrid Docken Mount, 'African art at the Cincinnati Art Museum', *African Arts*, xiii (August, 1980), 40-6, 88.

¹⁴ I have come across such sketches and photographs in travellers' accounts, contemporary journals and archival collections of postcards and photographs.

¹⁵ Gordon D. Gibson and Cecilia R. McGurk, 'High-status caps of the Kongo and Mbundu peoples', *Textile Museum Journal*, iv (1977), 73; Vansina, *Tio Kingdom*, 154, 453; Anne Hilton, *The Kingdom of Kongo* (Oxford, 1985), 37, 96, 118, 138, 205, 224.

Into the colonial experience, therefore, many Central Africans brought a well-informed knowledge of the symbolic importance of dress and the association of style, finery, wealth and power. Those with access to goods from the Atlantic trade had been mixing and matching indigenous and imported cloth, clothes and accessories for centuries. As the power of capitalism to flood the African market with cheap manufactured goods should not be minimized, so the previous association of power and material wealth should not be forgotten. Clearly, there was a strong sense of what has aptly been called the 'politics of costume'.¹⁶ Indigenous populations were drawn to imported goods not in some simple-minded childish way, as some contemporary Europeans thought; rather, they appropriated foreign items in a purposeful manner derived from their pre-existing cultural perceptions.¹⁷ Missionaries and others who introduced new ideas on clothing were grafting onto an existing praxis, rather than introducing a new means of social differentiation. Nowhere was this more demonstrated than in the new colonial town of Brazzaville, where a volatile and fluctuating population used innovative forms of dress as they forged and contested social relations.

THE CONVERGENCE OF CLOTHING TRADITIONS

The colonial experience in Brazzaville, capital of French Equatorial Africa (AEF), injected two new dimensions into the clothing tradition. First, many who had previously lacked access to clothes now had the chance to wear them every day and to choose among different styles. In the pre-colonial era, the production and distribution of the most valued cloth had been in the hands of senior lineages and royal families, who had seen this power diffused to a new entrepreneurial class with access to imported cloth. Under colonial rule, anyone with access to a cash income could buy cloth and clothing in a market or store. Widespread availability heightened the discourse over what constituted appropriate apparel, a topic charged with meaning as it paralleled ongoing negotiations of status and social differentiation. Also, as others have noted elsewhere in Africa, town life was characterized by a large degree of choice.¹⁸ Clothing was an intrinsic part of the process of choosing, not only social networks but also 'communities of taste'.¹⁹

¹⁶ J. Picton and J. Mack, *African Textiles: Looms, Weaving and Design* (London, 1979), 175.

¹⁷ The point is developed further in the next section for the Brazzaville situation, but it has also been documented for other areas. See, for example, T. O. Beidelman, *Colonial Evangelism: A Socio-Historical Study of an East African Mission at the Grassroots* (Bloomington, 1982), and Jean and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa* (Chicago, 1991). For similar encounters elsewhere, see Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge MA, 1991).

¹⁸ Philip Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen: Conservation and the Process of Urbanization in a South African City* (Cape Town, 1951), 14, quoted in David Coplan, *In Township Tonight! South Africa's Black City Music and Theatre* (London, 1987), 232; and Christopher Alan Waterman, *Juju: A Social History and Ethnography of an African Popular Music* (Chicago, 1990), 6-7.

¹⁹ J. H. Nketia, 'The gramophone and contemporary African music in the Gold Coast', *Proceedings of the Fourth Annual Conference of the West African Institute of Economic and Social Research* (Ibadan, 1955), 189-200.

Secondly, colonial rule brought closer interaction among peoples from more diverse regions than had previously existed. In an essay on cultural and intellectual history entitled 'African cross-currents', Andrew Roberts draws attention to the very porous nature of colonial frontiers and the circulation of ideas through the coming and going of workers, traders, refugees and family members.²⁰ This openness to new ideas was certainly the case in Brazzaville situated on the north bank of Malebo Pool, at the end of hundreds of miles of navigable inland waterways and a half hour by ferry across the Congo River from the much larger colonial capital of Léopoldville-Kinshasa. By the 1920s, Sunday afternoon dances to the latest popular music were a great place for Kinois and Brazzavillois to mingle and show off the latest in fashion.²¹

A number of foreigners also arrived in Brazzaville from further afield. Once France had occupied Equatorial Africa during the period of conquest and had secured it from European competitors, it abandoned the region to concessionary companies. Apart from a small and struggling primary school and a trade school, serious attempts at public education were non-existent in Brazzaville before 1925. Since mission schools could not produce sufficient literate and trained workers to satisfy the needs of the colonial economy, both the colonial administration and the trading companies actively recruited foreign skilled labour in Gabon and West Africa. Off-duty West African *tirailleurs* also frequented Poto-Poto and Baongo, the African districts of Brazzaville, as did black colonial administrators from the French Antilles.²²

Constituting the new urban élite and the model of success in the new society, these foreigners were early fashion leaders. Since their regions of origin had much longer contact with Europe than the Pool area, they were particularly influential in introducing European styles. The Duc d'Uzès, describing his impressions of Dakar in 1892 while en route to Congo, wrote to his mother that 'some Senegalese are dressed in the latest Paris fashions, with hats, jackets, shirts, ties, trousers, belts, shoes and canes'.²³ At Libreville, stylish men in suits and women wearing long dresses were to be seen in the streets.²⁴ Photographs by Europeans en route to the interior show domestic servants from Loango in their leisure time, wearing jackets, waist cloths, socks, shoes and large brimmed hats. They also carried canes.²⁵ In 1901, a priest visiting the sick in Brazzaville found 'Christians from Senegal

²⁰ Andrew Roberts, 'African cross currents', in Andrew Roberts (ed.), *Cambridge History of Africa*, Vol. 7: 1905-1960 (Cambridge, 1986), 224-31.

²¹ Hermann Norden, *Auf neuen Pfaden in Kongo: quer durch das dunkelste Afrika* (Leipzig, 1926), 262; Chalux, *Un an au Congo Belge* (Brussels, 1925), 157-8.

²² Administrator Bonchamps, 'Rapport sur la région de Brazzaville', Brazzaville, 1 May 1900. I am grateful to Roger Frey for making his copy of this report available to me. Also L. Girard, 'Brazzaville', *Bulletin du Comité de l'Afrique Française: Renseignements Coloniaux* [hereafter *BCAF*] (March 1916), 38.

²³ Duchesse d'Uzès, *Le voyage de mon fils au Congo* (Paris, 1894), 15.

²⁴ Reported in Jean Dybowski, *Le Congo méconnu* (Paris, 1912), 161; Charles Castellani, *Vers le Nil français avec la mission Marchand* (Paris, 1898), 33; also, Académie des Sciences d'Outre-Mer (ASOM), Paris, Fonds Bruel, B-213-50, photograph, 'Gabon-naises à Libreville, 1908'.

²⁵ Paul Brunache, *Le centre de l'Afrique: autour du Tchad* (Paris, 1894), 13; ASOM, Fonds Bruel, B-5-40, photograph, 'Congo-Brazzaville-Boy Loango, 1907'.

and from all the West Coast'. Most of them 'imitated whites in everything detestable; and on the roads, we meet the crudest sort of dandies'. Describing these lapsed Christians disapprovingly, the priest noted that they were wearing 'real trousers, jackets, soft brimmed hats, carried canes and had a cigarette hanging from their lips'. The most 'resourceful' were wearing 'down-at-the-heel shoes left behind by some explorer'.²⁶ In the years before the First World War, starched white and khaki suits modelled after the wear of white colonial officers were high fashion among the riverboat workers who came ashore on Sundays. Diversity of styles and the development of local styles is also hinted at in European accounts. Young men from Loango wore their shirts outside their trousers, a style which may have been introduced from West Africa.²⁷ An account by Gaston Bouteillier, an agent for several of the factories along the Pool waterfront, describes workers relaxing in Poto-Poto on New Years' Day, which was a public holiday. 'Women were dressed in their most colourful *pagnes* and the men wore their finest clothes such as trousers and frock-coats which they had bought second-hand'. He went on to describe 'five Loangos' dressed in English army red-coats:

They were barefooted and the tops of their white shirts floated outside their trousers. You may be laughing at shirt-tails outside trousers, but for the native this is the last word in elegance. I tried several times to get my boys to dress like you and me with the shirt tucked inside the trousers, but they said that that is for whites and continued to do it their own way.²⁸

In the 1920s, the Gabonese and those from Loango continued to be fashion leaders among an educated élite. Men wore suits and used accessories such as canes, monocles, gloves and pocket watches on chains. They formed clubs around their interest in fashion, gathering to drink aperitifs and dance to Cuban and European music played on the phonograph. According to informants, women from Gabon introduced European-style clothes. Some were wives of successful African traders; others lived with European men on a casual basis or, through their families, had arranged temporary marriages. They introduced short dresses, silk stockings and high heeled shoes. They also used accessories such as handbags and umbrellas, straightened or tied their hair and used rice flour make-up. At the same time, West African women introduced new styles of wearing cloth, sometimes made into a long dress and belted at the waist.²⁹

²⁶ 'Communauté du Sacre-Coeur de Brazzaville', *Bulletin de la Congrégation des Pères du Saint-Esprit (BCPSE)*, xxi (1901-2), 668.

²⁷ P. Augouard, 44 *Années au Congo* (Evreux, 1934), 83, 191; J. Remy, 'Une procession à Brazzaville', *Annales Apostoliques* (Sept. 1912), 229; letter from Sam Hede, Brazzaville, 15 Dec. 1913, published in *Missionsförbundet* (1914), 86-7; Félicien Challaye, *Le Congo Français: la question internationale du Congo* (Paris, 1909), 30; interview with Bernard Mambeke-Boucher, 20 Nov. 1986.

²⁸ Gaston Bouteillier, *Douze mois sous l'équateur* (Toulouse, 1903), 73-4.

²⁹ Interview with Mère Emilie, 12 June 1989; interview with M. Moustapha, 15 June 1989; interview with Bernard Mambeke-Boucher, 20 Nov. 1986; Charles Castellani, *Les femmes au Congo* (Paris, 1898), 35-41, 111-12, 120; J. Bonnefont, 'Brazzaville: la ville et la mission', *Annales Apostoliques* (July-Aug. 1926), 110; Maurice Briault, 'La mode chez les noirs', *Annales des Pères du Saint-Esprit* (April 1929), 126.



Fig. 3. European couple, Mayombe region, 1912. *Source:* Postcard Collection, Roger Frey.

The arrival of Europeans greatly influenced tastes in clothes, especially those of educated élite men who abandoned the earlier predilection for cast-off military uniforms and dress clothes in favour of the more conventional wear of white administrators and businessmen. According to informants, their fathers and grandfathers wanted to dress as much like a European as possible, for this was the mark of an *évolué*. Although the term is now completely discredited, it was a label once carried consciously and proudly, for it demonstrated achievement in the new society, western education, knowledge of European manners and sophistication as a townsman.³⁰

Not least among the reasons for looking for employment with whites was that clothing often came with the job.³¹ Yet, whites often insisted on clothes which satisfied their dress conventions and communicated the subordinate role of their employees. Servants had to wear shorts and were not allowed to wear shoes. The *tirailleurs*, including those who were school graduates and were doing military service, went bare-footed. Police who patrolled Baongo and Poto-Poto wore a red fez, a shirt, shorts and leggings, but no shoes. On

³⁰ Interview with Sylvain Bemba, 2 Jan. 1987; interview with Mambeke-Boucher, 1 Dec. 1986. Also see Justin-Daniel Gandoulou, *Dandies à Baongo: le culte de l'élégance dans la société congolaise contemporaine* (Paris, 1989), 6.

³¹ Placide N'Zala-Backa, *Le tipoye d'oré* (Brazzaville, 1968), 93; Svenska Missionsförbundet (SMF), Stockholm, FI, Brazzaville Mission Journal, 4 April 1915; interview with Mambeke-Boucher, 20 Nov. 1986; interview with Roger Frey, 9 July 1987.

the other hand, the status of white collar workers was displayed in their European-style khaki outfits, socks and shoes.³² It was in their leisure time that individuals could truly display their fashion sense, their status as wage earners and the extent of their wardrobe.

Most Africans observed whites from a distance, but house servants who laundered their employer's clothes were conduits of intimate information. They noticed styles and the quantity of clothes which Europeans possessed, thus confirming the association of power, wealth and clothing. Arriving in Brazzaville as a company employee in 1920, Jean de Puytorac, recalls how he unpacked with the help of his servant whose 'eyes shone as he touched the jackets, trousers, shirts and socks'.³³ An official guide published by the office of the Governor-General in 1913 for European colonial officers preparing for an 18-month tour of duty in AEF, gave a detailed clothing list which included a helmet and a light-weight hat, six white uniforms, six khaki outfits, several lightweight shirts, a flannel belt, a rubber raincoat, boots, shoes and so on.³⁴ Formality in dress at social gatherings was essential in a European colonial society which was a byword for pettiness and protocol, as it enacted obligatory and extravagant social rituals.³⁵

European women, too, had many clothes, especially if they were married to an upper-level administrator or an army officer, for they had to attend many social functions and further their husband's career as 'incorporated wives'.³⁶ The popular magazine, *Le Monde Colonial Illustré*, featured a fashion column with clothing tips for French women in the tropics. According to Gabrielle Vassal, wife of the Director of Health Services in the early 1920s, her daily routine included changing her clothes four times as she worked in her flower garden, socialized with other white women, played tennis in the late afternoon and dressed for dinner with her husband.³⁷ Fashion ideas were also transmitted through magazines and order catalogues, which were received in the mail by Europeans. Once discarded, these found their way into African hands, becoming a topic of conversation among the fashion-conscious.³⁸

³² Interview with Papa Albert, 17 June 1989; interview with Mambeke-Boucher, 20 Nov. 1986; Marcel Homet, *Congo: terre de souffrances* (Paris, 1934), 218; Peggy Sabatier, 'Did Africans really learn to be French? The francophone élite of the École William Ponty', in G. Wesley Johnson (ed.), *Double Impact: France and Africa in the Age of Imperialism* (Westport, 1985), 181-2.

³³ Jean de Puytorac, *Makambo: une vie au Congo (Brazzaville-M'Bondo)* (Cadeilhan, 1992), 46; Gabrielle Vassal, *Life in French Congo* (London, 1925), 27, 115; Gandoulou, *Dandies à Bacongou*, 11.

³⁴ Ferdinand Rouget, *L'Afrique Équatoriale illustrée* (Paris, 1913), 70, 73, 77.

³⁵ For example, see Julien Maigret, 'Nos grandes cités coloniales: Brazzaville', *Le Monde Colonial Illustré*, xxxii (April 1926), 83; Puytorac, *Makambo*, 158-62; Marcel Sauvage, *Sous le feu de l'équateur: les secrets de l'Afrique noire* (Paris, 1944), 68-9. Also Phyllis Martin, 'Leisure and the making of a ruling class in colonial Brazzaville', in Patricia Galloway (ed.), *Proceedings of the Seventeenth Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* (Chicago, May 1991) (Lanham, 1993), 99-114.

³⁶ Hilary Callan, 'Introduction', in Hilary Callan and Shirley Ardener (eds.), *The Incorporated Wife* (London, 1984), 1-5. ³⁷ Vassal, *Life in French Congo*, 27-9.

³⁸ Andrée Blouin in collaboration with Jean MacKellar, *My Country Africa: Autobiography of the Black Pasionaria* (New York, 1983), 62; Raymond Vacquier, *Au temps des factories (1900-1950)* (Paris, 1986), 101.

Missionaries also had great potential as a source of clothing. Indeed, this was a prime attraction of a mission station, where the distribution of clothes must have echoed the patron-client relationships of big men and dependants in pre-colonial times. In 1890, Monseigneur Carrie warned the directors of the Catholic schools against handing out clothes to children 'too soon, for they will take them and leave'.³⁹ Ephraim Andersson of the Swedish Protestant Mission confirmed the attraction of material possessions, writing that 'the young lads who invaded the schools, often against the advice of their parents and family heads, had very varied motives such as good clothes and literacy'.⁴⁰ Students also benefited from the competing interests of church and state by exploiting opportunities for clothing. In 1914, noting the poor attendance at the newly established Urban School, the mayor of Brazzaville sent messengers around Baongo and Poto-Poto to ask why parents were sending their children to the Catholic Mission rather than to the public school. The answer came back that the missionaries gave children uniforms and a meal in the middle of the day. The principal suggested to the Mayor, therefore, that a local tailor be given a contract to sew uniforms and that special caps be ordered from France as a means of competing with the Catholics for students.⁴¹

Africans continued to see the church as a useful source of clothing well into the colonial period. In 1949, the Governor of Moyen Congo reported to the Governor-General that 'part of the success of the Salvation Army seems to be that they distribute quantities of cloth for the uniforms of their members'.⁴² A former Boy Scout remembered the attraction of the uniforms, especially socks and shoes, while another remembered that he wore a beret for the first time at Scout meetings. In 1952, a French Social Service worker reported that the number of Scouts had declined since funds had run out. Boys attended meetings only when uniforms were provided.⁴³

Catholic missionaries and European employers were engaged in the same task of drawing an imaginary line in matters of dress based on their perceptions of the natural and colonial order. Their prescriptions and prohibitions derived from the idea that Africans were child-like by nature and needed to be disciplined as such. Yet, the agenda of missionaries went further, for they were engaged in an ambitious task, 'to remake Africans through their everyday activities'.⁴⁴ In this crusade, clothes were an important tool in instilling Christian values of simplicity, humility and modesty, and in reinforcing notions of the 'place' of Africans in the church and colonial hierarchy. Hats and shoes were forbidden for children, for

³⁹ Monseigneur Carrie, *Coutumier de l'oeuvre des enfants dans le vicariat apostolique du Congo Français* (Loango, 1890), 43-4.

⁴⁰ Ephraim Andersson, *Churches at the Grass Roots: A Study in Congo-Brazzaville* (London, 1968), 189.

⁴¹ Archives Nationales du Congo, Brazzaville (ANB), GG481, reports by the Principal of the Urban School to the Mayor of Brazzaville, 31 Dec. 1913, 31 March and 25 June 1914.

⁴² Archives Outre-Mer, Aix-en-Provence (AOM), Governor of Moyen Congo to Governor-General, 17 July 1948.

⁴³ Interview with Clement Massengo, 24 Nov. 1986; interview with Mambeke-Boucher, 20 Nov. 1986; ANB, IGE 144(1), Report from the Department of Youth, Sport and School Hygiene, 1952-3.

⁴⁴ Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, 12.



Fig. 4. Christian family at catholic mission, dressed according to Mgr Corrie's rules, c. 1910. Source: Photo Collection, Archives des Pères du Saint Esprit, Chevilly (APSE), photograph collection.

'these are too European and encourage vices', wrote Monseigneur Carrie who developed the rules for the mission stations of the Holy Ghost Fathers. Boys wore a shirt and a waist cloth, and girls a simple, ankle-length dress, or a loose blouse with a cloth.⁴⁵ Stressing the necessity of training girls to be obedient Christian wives and mothers, Monseigneur Augouard, the influential Bishop of Upper Congo from 1891 to 1920, wrote, 'we do not need grandes dames'.⁴⁶

On the other hand, the message of the church confirmed the close association of clothing and power. Boarding schools promoted class distinctions, since the few whose parents could provide them with clothes were allowed to wear them on Sundays while poorer children wore the school

⁴⁵ Carrie, *Coutumier*, 43-4; and *Organisation de la Mission du Congo Français* (Loango, 1898), n.p.; Briault, 'La mode chez les noirs', 95-6.

⁴⁶ Quoted in J. Marthey, 'L'oeuvre missionnaire pour la population feminine au Congo', *Revue d'Histoire des Colonies*, XLIV (1957), 81. Emphasis in the original.



Fig. 5. Mgr Guichard and the pontifical procession, Brazzaville Cathedral, 1920s. *Source*: Postcard in a collection commissioned by the Brazzaville Catholic Mission, Archives des Pères du Saint Esprit, Chevilly (APSE), photograph collection.

uniform. Prefects appointed to keep order in the dormitories and school yard wore grey caps and carried whistles. Others in the hierarchy of the Christian community, whether seminarians, choir boys or members of the youth club band were issued with special uniforms.⁴⁷ The ultimate display of power was the magnificence of the cathedral clergy in their vestments and regalia at Sunday Mass. Monseigneur Augouard established a tradition of grandeur, for he 'loved the military manner with its braid, insignia and decorations', wrote a fellow Spiritan. Thousands turned out on Holy Days such as Easter and All Saints Day to watch the bishop's procession and attend the services.⁴⁸

In the negotiation of clothing traditions, some articles of clothing were more powerful than others. When young men entered the labour market for

⁴⁷ Carrie, *Coutumier*, 17, 37, and *Oeuvres des Soeurs de Saint Joseph de Cluny dans la mission du Congo Français* (Loango, 1897), 6.

⁴⁸ Maurice Briault, 'Le cinquantenaire de la mission du Congo Français: Brazzaville, 1888-1938', *Revue d'Histoire des Missions*, xv (1938), 509. Descriptions of these occasions are to be found in the reports from Brazzaville that appeared in the *BCPSE* and in the *Annales Apostoliques*. Although many Frenchmen were anti-clerical, some who describe Monseigneur Augouard more sympathetically confirm accounts of these grand occasions. The influence of the Catholic church, especially faced with the weakness of the state is an important theme in the history of Brazzaville.

the first time, hats were among the first items that they bought. By the 1920s, a variety of second-hand hats were available, from old pith helmets to jockey caps, trilby hats and woollen caps.⁴⁹ These gave status and had the added benefit of enhancing an outfit with a flamboyant and personal touch. Although hats lost much of their symbolic value as they became more common, they still could lend dignity and authority to an individual when worn in the correct combination of clothes. The red fez of the *tirailleurs* still commanded respect when it was worn by veterans or by the local police. Tropical helmets, which, according to a theory that persisted until about 1940, were mandatory for Europeans to fend off death by sunstroke, projected authority if worn with the uniform of a colonial officer.⁵⁰ According to his biographers, Félix Éboué, the black West Indian administrator who became Governor-General of AEF during the Second World War, wore his helmet as a young man, so that Europeans would not mistake him for a 'native' and subject him to abusive behavior and the tyranny of the African legal code, the *indigénat*. Writing to his family in Cayenne, he noted that some Africans would not obey him since he was a black man, but their attitude improved when he wore his peaked cap and braided uniform.⁵¹

Shoes entered the wardrobe of Africans much later than hats. Second-hand pairs were uncomfortable, and they were more difficult to come by. Office workers and factory agents wore them to work, however. The symbolic power of clothes and the conscious manner in which they were worn were shown in an incident in 1936 when white administrators decreed that shoes could not be worn in club football matches since, in their view, they encouraged violent play. Team leaders who were accustomed to wearing shoes in the work place as well as at leisure refused to play rather than follow the ruling which they found insulting and symptomatic of European interference in autonomous township activities. Their boycott contributed to the eventual collapse of the town's official football organization but not of football matches, which continued informally in Poto-Poto and Baongo and more formally in the Catholic Mission league.⁵²

Gender distinctions in the work force were clearly signalled in the dress of men and women trained by missionaries. Descriptions of couples married in multiple weddings by priests and nuns at the Brazzaville cathedral in the mid-1920s show young men wearing suits, shirts, ties, shoes and hats, while young women wore blouses, cloth, headscarves and beads around their ankles and were barefooted. A photograph of one such occasion, where a line of young women stand beside their 'fiancés,' depicts vividly the domestication for which wives had been trained by their missionary sponsors.

⁴⁹ Interview with Mambeke-Boucher, 20 Nov. 1986; Vassal, *Life in French Congo*, 72; Gabrielle and Joseph Vassal, *Français, belges et portugais en Afrique Équatoriale: Pointe-Noire, Matadi, Lobito* (Paris, 1931), 153.

⁵⁰ Docteur Fougerat de David de Lastours, 'Hygiène, nudité, soleil aux colonies', communication to the *Société de Médecine et d'Hygiène Tropicale* (Paris, 1927); Roger Frey, 'Soleil et colonies', *L'Étoile de l'AEF*, 6 Aug. 1938.

⁵¹ Brian Weinstein, *Éboué* (New York, 1972), 23; Sophie Ulrich, *Le Gouverneur-Général Félix Éboué* (Paris, 1950), 23-4.

⁵² For more details on this incident, see Phyllis M. Martin, 'Colonialism, youth and football in French Equatorial Africa', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, VIII (1991), 56-71.



Fig. 6. Colonial administrator in correct uniform, Brazzaville, 1937. *Source:* Roger Frey Collection.

Their lack of access to wage labour also meant that townswomen acquired more expensive clothes later than men. When asked why women did not wear shoes, informants simply stated that they could not afford them.⁵³

CLOTHING AND CONSUMERS

These various clothing traditions, whether homespun or foreign, converged in the new town where strangers jostled with each other in constructing social relations. In this environment, the importance of clothing was only enhanced, for goods expressed new cultural and social categories in a visible

⁵³ Interview with Mère Emilie, 13 June 1989; interview with M. Moustapha, 15 June 1989; R. P. Jaffre, 'De Plougastch au Congo', *Annales Apostoliques*, xxiii (1930), 2; Report from the Community at Brazzaville, *Annales de la Congregation des Soeurs de Saint Joseph de Cluny*, LXIX (1938), 71; Archives des Pères du Saint-Esprit, Chevilly (APSE), Photograph Collection.

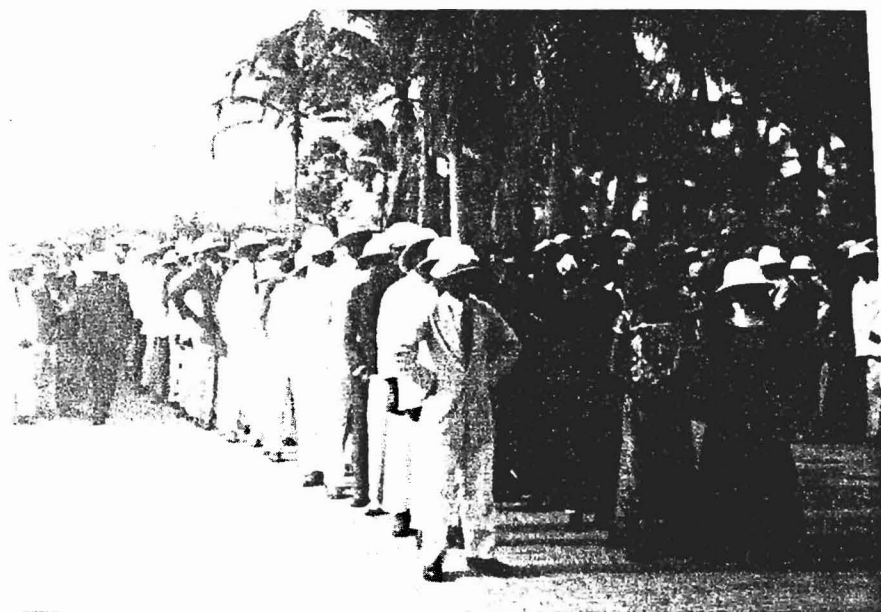


Fig. 7. Couples lined up for their wedding ceremony at Brazzaville Cathedral, 1920s. Source: Archives des Peres du Saint Esprit, Chevilly (APSE), photograph collection.

and intelligible manner. They were what Mary Douglas called a 'live information system'.⁵⁴ Among material possessions, clothes had great appeal. They were fun, highly visible and easily movable, all qualities advantageous to the young migrant workers who constituted a large part of Brazzaville's population.⁵⁵ They were also more accessible and affordable than other desirable goods such as oil lamps, furniture, bicycles and phonographs, which were beyond the wildest dreams of many workers.

Perhaps these were some of the reasons for the attraction of clothing in the colonial town, as Africans created a world which whites observed from a distance. Missionaries continued to report disapprovingly that young men

⁵⁴ Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption* (New York, 1979), 5, 10, 59. Other useful discussions of culture and consumerism can be found in Elizabeth A. Perkins, 'The consumer frontier: household consumption in early Kentucky', *Journal of American History*, LXXVIII (1991), 486-510; *Culture and History*, VII (1990), special issue on consumerism; and Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington, 1988).

⁵⁵ Data from the first reliable census, 1950-1, were published by Marcel Soret; however, other accounts confirm the statement from an earlier period. See Marcel Soret, *Démographie et problèmes urbains en A.E.F.: Poto-Poto, Baongo, Dolisie* (Montpellier, 1954), 9-10, 39-42.

were engaged in a 'clothing frenzy'. The social advantages of dressing well were so great that some who could not afford it were in debt.⁵⁶ In the 1920s, Gabrielle and Joseph Vassal also wrote that Brazzaville servants 'can be half dying of hunger' but would go to buy clothes 'as soon as they are paid'.⁵⁷

While such comments may reveal as much about the Europeans who wrote them as about the actual situation, the documented evidence does suggest considerable expenditure. In 1932, administrative reports registered about one tailor for every hundred inhabitants of Poto-Poto and Baongo. Of these tailors, 29 lived in Poto-Poto and 121 in Baongo. This imbalance reflected the different composition of the African sections of town, with more prosperous and educated élite men and women living in Baongo.⁵⁸ Not included in these figures were the seamstresses who had turned their training at the convent to good effect. Only after the Second World War is it possible to have more precise data on the place of clothes in consumer budgets. In general, they confirm the patterns conveyed by descriptive accounts earlier in the century. According to French sociologists who carried out studies of Poto-Poto and Baongo, everyone was involved in dressing well. Reviewing a wide range of social situations, from a worker who rented a room with a mat and a few knickknacks to a successful trader or functionary, Georges Balandier wrote that 'vanity in clothing' was a common denominator. The expense of dressing well, especially 'Sunday clothes', weighed heavily on individuals, sometimes forcing them to cut back on food and other household needs.⁵⁹ A survey of a thousand budgets by Marcel Soret in 1951 found that clothes made up, on an average, 21 per cent of expenditures, compared to 53 per cent for food, 7 per cent for drink, 5 per cent for rent and taxes, 4 per cent for savings and 10 per cent for diverse expenses (entertainment, presents, etc.).⁶⁰ In Poto-Poto, there was one tailor for every 200 inhabitants; in Baongo, there was one for every 95 inhabitants.⁶¹ Even the unemployed made 'desperate efforts' to keep the threadbare clothes they possessed in good order. They depended on family members or friends for second-hand items or bought used clothing with small change that they earned through odd jobs.⁶²

Although employers and church organizations continued to hand out uniforms, these gradually faded away as a significant source of clothing by the 1920s. With more workers taking up wage labour and with monetization of daily life transactions, cloth and clothing could be acquired by anyone with cash. Manufacturers, both influencing and responding to demand, increased the supply and variety of consumer products. Although street signs

⁵⁶ 'Communauté du Sacré-Coeur, à Brazzaville', *BCPSE*, xxvii (1910-13), 55; Bonnefont, 'Brazzaville: la ville et la mission', 108-9; Briault, 'La mode', 124-6.

⁵⁷ Vassal, *Français, belges et portugais*, 153.

⁵⁸ AOM, 4(2)D55, Report of Commune of Brazzaville, 3rd trimester 1932; 5D65, Annual Report of Moyen Congo, 1932.

⁵⁹ Georges Balandier, 'Évolution de la société et de l'homme', in Eugène Guernier (ed.), *Afrique Équatoriale Française* (Paris, 1950), 126.

⁶⁰ Soret, *Démographie et problèmes urbains en A.E.F.*, 91.

⁶¹ Georges Balandier, *Sociologie des Brazzavilles noires* (Paris, 1955), 92.

⁶² G. Althabe, *Étude du chômage à Brazzaville en 1957-étude psychologique* (Paris, 1963), 10, 12; R. Devaues, *Étude du chômage à Brazzaville en 1957-étude sociologique* (Paris, 1963), 83.

outside individual stores might attract customers, the mass marketing of goods through advertizing was hardly developed. Goods rather achieved their value and popularity through word of mouth or through observation.

The association of wages with consumerism was established very early in the process of European expansion into Central Africa. Brazza advised his men to pay workers with tokens that could be exchanged in factory stores. This policy was later changed to a cash wage in answer to African demands.⁶³ Most of the factories that lined the Pool waterfront by 1900 had well-stocked stores with a good selection of items. In 1920, the *Compagnie Française du Bas-Congo* employed three tailors with treadle Singer sewing machines who sat on the veranda of the store and took orders from those who bought cloth inside. Catalogues from which customers could select styles lay beside them. One tailor was nicknamed 'Fayette' after the Galerie Lafayette, since he favoured designs from that catalogue.⁶⁴ Workers could also buy consumer items in individual stores. In 1888, only a few years after the French had established their colonial outpost, there were six stores owned by two Portuguese, a Spaniard and three Senegalese.⁶⁵ At the beginning of the century, the Brazzaville administrator reported to his superiors that 'Africans are beginning to use money to buy goods and this will soon be widely accepted'.⁶⁶ The mayor's report on the town's development between about 1911 and 1915 noted that many new stores had opened in response to 'a growing number of Africans with European manners and tastes. They buy European goods whenever possible'. Among the shop-keepers were 'numerous Senegalese'.⁶⁷

Portuguese traders were the most prominent of the European entrepreneurs who responded to the growing African market. They operated at a lower profit margin than the larger British, French and Dutch trading companies and had prices which more Africans could afford. The most famous store was owned by a leading figure in the Portuguese community, Mario de Figueiredo, who arrived in Brazzaville in 1911 to trade and operate river transport. Four years later, he opened his first store in the Plaine, Brazzaville's business district, and in 1927 he moved it to an attractive building on the Avenue de Commerce.⁶⁸ Targeting African consumers, he called his store 'Kitoko', meaning 'beautiful' or 'elegant' in Lingala. Kitoko was well-stocked with everything from basins to bicycles, sugar to soap, and cloth, shoes, hats, umbrellas and sunglasses. For an inexperienced African consumer like Andrée Blouin, a Portuguese store presented 'a delirium of new images'.⁶⁹ Other overseas suppliers also moved into the African market

⁶³ Coquery-Vidrovitch, *Brazza et la prise de possession du Congo*, 209-10; Élisabeth Rabut, *Brazza Commissaire Général: le Congo Français, 1886-1887* (Paris, 1989), 364-6.

⁶⁴ Puytorac, *Makambo*, 47-50, 56; see, Vacquier, *Au temps des factoreries*, for a comprehensive account of the stock carried by stores of the *Compagnie Française d'Afrique Occidentale*, which had an outlet in Brazzaville.

⁶⁵ Roger Frey, 'Brazzaville, capitale de l'Afrique Équatoriale', *Encyclopédie mensuelle d'outre-mer*, XLVIII-XLIX (Aug.-Sept. 1954), 37.

⁶⁶ AOM, 4(2)D1, Brazzaville Administrator to Commissioner-General of French Congo in Libreville, 13 July 1901.

⁶⁷ Girard, 'Brazzaville', 30-3.

⁶⁸ 'Les vieux Brazzavillois: Kitoko retour', *L'Étoile de l'AEF*, 9 Nov. 1930; 'La colonie portugaise', *Perspectives d'outre-mer*, XVIII (1956), 61-2.

⁶⁹ Blouin, *My Country Africa*, 66.

in spite of high tariffs levied by the colonial government. Among them was Japan, which in 1938 accounted for 40 per cent of the clothes imported into AEF. In the period between the wars, the Japanese cornered the market in footwear. At a time when few could afford leather shoes, Japanese companies supplied white canvas shoes called 'tennis' and shiny black shoes made entirely from rubber.⁷⁰

Most Africans, however, bought cloth and commissioned outfits from tailors and seamstresses; or they were given or bought second-hand clothes. Cheap garments unwanted in Europe were also unloaded in the African market such as surplus pyjamas, left behind by American forces after the First World War, which appeared on the streets of Brazzaville.⁷¹ Cloth could be bought in local markets, but shoppers also took the ferry across the Pool to the much larger Kinshasa markets, where prices were generally lower.⁷² Around the Baongo and Poto-Poto markets, where the Senegalese and Portuguese had small stores, tailors with sewing machines sat outside cloth stores to take orders, as they did at the trading factories. Seamstresses who had been trained in needlework and embroidery by the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Cluny worked at home, where they were visited by clients for discussions of styles and fittings.⁷³

European dress was more and more adopted as the preferred wear of townsmen. Men wearing cotton waist-cloths were still to be seen in the streets of Brazzaville in the 1930s, but they were usually elderly or newly arrived workers from the upper Congo. Among the social leaders, it was no longer sufficient merely to dress in European clothes; one also had to dress correctly in them. A joke about a man who attended church dressed in pyjamas circulated among those who called themselves *évolués*.⁷⁴

A letter from a young man, Camille Diata, who worked as a clerk-interpreter in the government Treasury office to an out-of town acquaintance who worked for the Post and Telegraph Service, shows clothing was an integral part of young urban élite culture. The association of cost with high fashion is also made clear, as is the interest in a particular style of the moment:

I will also tell you of all that is happening in the village of Baongo: it is forbidden to go out after nine at night: palavers over women, beer-drinking, dancing, the fashion Popo, etc., etc. Do you know that in Brazzaville and Kinshasa all the gentlemen or young men are dressing in Popo? That is to say, owning a helmet from Ollivant's worth 150 francs, a silk shirt; a suit of poplin, or other fabric that is worth 250 to 300 francs at least; and trousers which must reach down to touch the heels of one's shoes. Well-dressed women are wearing silk head scarves that cost 50 francs each and their cloths, costing 150 francs, must be well-cut by a

⁷⁰ *Courrier d'Afrique*, 8 Nov. 1951; 'L'expansion japonaise en Afrique', *BCAF* (1934), 496-7.

⁷¹ Puytorac, *Makambo*, 62.

⁷² Interview with Mère Emilie, 12 June 1989; interview with M. Moustapha, 15 June 1989; interview with S. Scholastique, 13 Nov. 1986; Pierre Pellerin, *Une enfance en brousse congolaise* (Paris, 1990), 125.

⁷³ Blouin, *My Country Africa*, 114-15.

⁷⁴ Interview with Mambeke-Boucher, 20 Nov. 1986; interview with Maya Ahlden, 7 Nov. 1986; interview with S. Clothilde, 10 Nov. 1986; Marcel Sauvage, *Les secrets de l'Afrique noire* (Paris, 1937), 70-1; M. Rondet-Saint, *Sur les routes du Cameroun et de l'A.E.F.* (Paris, 1933), 139.

skilled tailor. I do not want to tell you everything all at once since you don't write to me. There is a great deal to tell you, but I don't have the time. The town of Brazzaville is developing and so are its inhabitants.⁷⁵

Elderly informants, looking back on the 1940s and 1950s, remember with pride and in detail their wardrobes of that era. New synthetic fabrics in polyester meant that clothes lasted longer and were easier to care for. 'I took very good care of my clothes which were made from polyester', said one. Another stated: 'I dressed very correctly. I wore a smoking jacket, a tie and polyester trousers'.⁷⁶ A favourite style which remains in popular memory involved very loose garments made from a light material which 'shimmered'. Called, 'tra-la-la', it was probably inspired by the clothing of visiting Latin American musicians. Other inspiration came from the cinema and from magazines. It was not uncommon to see these clippings decorating the interior walls of houses. Especially popular was the romantic singer and film star, Tino Rossi, who gave his name to a particular style.⁷⁷

The great majority of women wore African cloth. European dress, worn by some elite women earlier in the century, did not really catch on. Informants said that African cloth was more comfortable and that women, unlike men, did not get used to wearing European dress in the work place. For the vast majority of women, their 'worth' still rested in their children and their access to traditional resources, not their association with wage-labour for Europeans. Furthermore, for an adult women, African cloth communicated worth and well-being, which European dress could not do. People could 'read' the value of a *pagne*, which they could not do with short dresses.⁷⁸ Wearing European-style clothing was also related to age and class, with some young women and professional women alternating between short dresses and African cloth.

Informants talked about prints and quality of cloth rather than specific fashions. According to one man, people noticed when a woman wore a top quality wax print bought from a Senegalese trader. 'If your wife wore that

⁷⁵ AOM, 5D88, Camille Diata to Paul Mayoukou, Brazzaville, 19 March 1930. Baongo and Poto-Poto were referred to as 'villages' in contrast to the European 'town'. The style 'Popo' was most likely influenced by men from Dahomey. By way of assessing the cost of being fashionable, the wage of a writer-interpreter-typist at the government hospital was 12 francs per day (ANB, GG 444[2], Report of the General Hospital, Brazzaville 1930). Camille Diata who was jailed by the French as a supporter of André Matswa was 19 at the time that he wrote this letter. See Marcel Sinda, *Le messianisme congolais et ses incidences politiques* (Paris, 1972), 254 n.1. The letter was confiscated with other papers during a police raid and is preserved in the colonial archives. Letter-writing was a popular hobby among literate young men and Diata was no exception.

⁷⁶ Interview with Antoine Mangoyo, 29 Dec. 1986; interview with Honoré Monabeka, 27 Dec. 1986.

⁷⁷ Interview with Philippe Mokwami, 10 Jan. 1987; interview with Antoine Mangoyo, 29 Dec. 1987; interview with Louis Lingouala, 22 Dec. 1986; Gandoulou, *Dandies à Baongo*, 30; Sylvain Bemba, *50 ans de la musique du Congo-Zaïre* (Paris, 1984), 76, 82-3; Balandier, 'Évolution de la société et de l'homme', 126.

⁷⁸ Interview with Mère Emilie, 13 June 1989; interview with Sidone Ngole, 12 May 1988; interview with Albertine Mowango, 26 Dec. 1987; Jeanne-Françoise Vincent, *Femmes africaines en milieu urbain* (Paris, 1966), 201-3. The older perceptions of value in cloth live on in the present when, for example, cloth changes hands at the conclusion of a marriage contract.

cloth, people would say, "excellent", there goes a well-dressed woman'.⁷⁹ Although some classic patterns remained popular for years, manufacturers constantly introduced new prints to reflect current events and to increase their sales to women, who liked to keep up with the latest cloths, which they might wear or store. War heroes such as Charles de Gaulle with his arms upraised in greeting and Winston Churchill smoking on the deck of a ship figured large. A craze for things English, which started among the élite in the 1930s when they favoured Raleigh bicycles and His Masters' Voice gramophones, was taken up in the popular designs 'King George' and 'Queen Elizabeth'. Machines such as typewriters also appeared as cloth patterns. As each cloth appeared on the market and, became popularized through its name, through women discussing it and by wear, it was placed on a 'hierarchy of value'.⁸⁰ Women also spent money on head scarves, and, as footwear became cheaper, canvas shoes or sandals became part of dressing well in public. Élite women favoured sandals or canvas shoes made by Hausa shoemakers or canvas shoes with cork soles which were sold by the Portuguese.⁸¹ To go bare-footed became synonymous with worthlessness. A popular ballad called 'Marie Thérèse' recorded about 1950 by Jhimmy, a celebrated player of the Hawaiian guitar, referred to a poor woman:

Oh, soni te, oh tala ye,
Siata, siata pata, fioloko,
Eloko te, kitoko ndambo, makolongulu,

Eloko ya pamba.

Oh, what a pity, oh look at her,
What trash!
Worthless, unattractive, bare-footed,
A thing of little worth.⁸²

FASHION AND SOCIAL DISTINCTION

In the last two decades of colonial rule, the different arenas in which clothing was contested, as well as the participants in the drama, become clearer, as the sources improve in range and depth. African élites writing in journals and newspapers, popular songs and interviews with those who lived at the time, allow a sharper understanding of the relevance of clothes and fashion to controversies surrounding social change. In this context, it is probably not going too far to argue that clothes not only symbolized change, they were also 'instruments of innovation' that 'created and constituted change',⁸³ as they were central in asserting and conveying class, gender and generational aspirations.

All this took place in the context of rapid demographic growth and

⁷⁹ Interview with M. Moustapha, 15 June 1989; interview with Mère Emilie, 12 June 1989; interview with Anne Ngondjo, 15 June 1989; interview with Sidone Ngole, 12 May 1988.

⁸⁰ Emilienne Raoul-Matingou, *Activités des femmes en milieu urbain: le cas de Brazzaville* (Thèse de 3e Cycle, Université des Sciences et Techniques de Lille, 1982), 238; interview with Augustine Massalo, 23 Dec. 1986; interview with Mère Emilie, 12 June 1989; interview with Sidone Ngole, 12 May 1988; Blouin, *My Country Africa*, 90; Jacques Audibert, *Une compagnie commerciale en République Populaire du Congo: le CFAO* (Travail d'études et de recherches, Université de Bordeaux III, 1973), 38-9.

⁸¹ Blouin, *My Country Africa*, 29-30; interview with M. Moustapha, 15 June 1989; interview with Mère Emilie, 13 June 1989.

⁸² Jhimmy, 'Marie Thérèse', *La voix de son maître* (KIP 23).

⁸³ McCracken, *Culture and Consumption*, 60-1.

economic boom and recession. In the late colonial period, Brazzaville's population increased dramatically from about 35,000 in 1940 to 80,000 in 1950 and 125,000 at the time of independence in 1960. It was a period of rapid social change, particularly associated with the number of new immigrants and the youthfulness of the population. In 1951, the average age was 21, and in 1955 63 per cent of Bacongo and 74 per cent of Poto-Poto had been born outside Brazzaville.⁸⁴ Increased investment and a liberalization in French colonial policy following the 1944 Brazzaville Conference created public- and private-sector jobs that were filled by a small but influential middle class. The French also went some way towards rectifying their appalling record on education. New opportunities for basic schooling led to an upsurge in the numbers of literate young people with expectations of employment, independence and social advancement. Yet, the end of the post-war boom by the early 1950s left many unemployed.⁸⁵ In these uncertain times, clothing was at the center of swirling controversies that ranged over issues such as the cost of fashion, sexuality and styles of dress and the relationship of outward appearance to inner person. Older issues of status and clothing also remained in the forefront of the discourse.

As access to clothing became widespread, leaders of urban society watched and commented, using the newly established African press as their forum. Writing in the newspaper of the association, *Union éducative et mutuelle de la jeunesse de Brazzaville*, the Gabonese intellectual, Jean-Rémy Ayouné, warned of the moral dangers of giving too much attention to outward form rather than inner character. His words echoed those of early missionaries:

To be truly judged an *évolué* is not only to be judged by our clothes, our houses, our language and our manners, but especially to be judged by our education, intelligence and good will. Clothes do not make a man; and ties and shoes do not make an *évolué*.⁸⁶

A few years later, in a Catholic publication, Ayouné again criticized those who 'wasted money which they have labouriously earned' on conspicuous displays such as elaborate parties.⁸⁷ Yet, as had been the case earlier in the century, attempts to influence dress, whether motivated by attempts to protect positions of privilege or perceived moral standards, were doomed to failure or very limited success, as clothing styles evolved in the context of urban culture.

Women's fashions were also called into question by elite men. A barrage of male criticism coincided with the completion of post-primary education by a first generation of women who found jobs as secretaries, nurses and teachers. Young women delayed marriage and displayed independence from patriarchal controls. They went in groups to bars, where they smoked, drank beer, danced to the new pop music, found boy friends and dressed stylishly. Particularly celebrated for their displays of the latest fashion were groups of young women, organized in mutual-aid associations, who entertained high-

⁸⁴ Soret, *Démographie et problèmes urbaines en A.E.F.*, 39, 42.

⁸⁵ Elikia M'Bokolo, 'Forces sociales et idéologies dans la décolonisation de l'A.E.F.', *J. Afr. Hist.*, xxii (1981), 393-9; Devaues, *Étude du chômage à Brazzaville*, 11-17.

⁸⁶ J.-R. Ayouné, 'Notre but', *L'Éducation de la Jeunesse Africaine*, II (1942). Ayouné, himself, was an elegant and fastidious dresser.

⁸⁷ *Brazzaville (supplément de la Vie Catholique Illustrée)*, vii (April 1951).

class African and European men at 'Faignond's', the top night-club. Dressed in matching cloths and headscarves which they cut and tied in new styles, and wearing the latest in jewellery and make-up, these women set trends in fashion which seamstresses copied for their clients.⁸⁸

In several publications, including the literary magazine, *Liaison*, and the Catholic newspaper, *La Semaine de l'A.E.F.*, men debated their views on 'liberated' women, with educated women occasionally writing a reply. Articles bore titles such as: 'A great social problem of contemporary Africa: the corruption of the customs of women called *évoluées*', 'The evolution of African women', 'The zig-zag of African youth', 'The black woman as victim', 'Women's fashion: do clothes make the monk?', 'Young girls and fashion' and 'The voice of a courageous woman'.⁸⁹ Under the heading 'Modern clothing: a scourge', one writer, echoing Ayouné's view, complained that women saw clothes as 'the ship of evolution' and added, 'cloth does not do much without morality'.⁹⁰

While some castigated women for their extravagance in buying the finest, most fashionable cloths (*pièces de luxe*), others raised questions about fashion and female sexuality. The ambiguities of the times were illustrated when the African organizer of a 'Miss A.E.F.' beauty pageant arrived in Brazzaville in 1957. The competition for a 'Miss Brazzaville' sparked off a discussion about whether participants should wear African cloths or short skirts that would show their legs. According to a newspaper report, the finalists wore skimpy outfits to the 'satisfaction' of the largely male audience, many off-duty soldiers from the military base.⁹¹

The fashion of wearing *djiguida*, strings of beads which women wore under their cloths and which were believed to have erotic qualities, came under attack. Yet, while some men were critical of such open displays of sexuality, others encouraged it and used the beads as a sex symbol. One of the most famous songs of Paul Kamba, the first true Congolese pop singer from the Brazzaville side of the Pool, was entitled, '*djiguida*'. Recorded about 1949, it celebrated the powerful music of his band, 'Victoria', and ended with the verse:

⁸⁸ Interview with Mère Emilie, 13 June 1989; interview with Mambeke-Boucher, 1 Dec. 1986; 'Soirées de Poto-Poto', *France-Équateur* (13 Sept. 1954); Balandier, *Sociologie des Brazzavilles noires*, 146-8, and *Ambiguous Africa* (New York, 1966), 192-3. Some of these women were called by Balandier 'high-class prostitutes'; however, no systematic study of prostitution in Brazzaville comparable to that of Luise White (*The Comforts of Home* [Chicago, 1990]) for Nairobi has yet been undertaken. See Phyllis M. Martin, *Leisure and Society in Colonial Brazzaville* (forthcoming).

⁸⁹ François Mosingue, 'Un des grands problèmes sociaux de l'Afrique contemporaine: la corruption des mœurs des femmes dites évoluées', *Liaison*, LVIII (1957), 30-4; Joseph Pouabou, 'L'évolution de la femme africaine', *Liaison*, xv (1951), 13-14; Jérôme Bandila, 'Le zig-zag de la jeunesse', *Liaison*, xxxv (1953), 18-19; Paul Kaya, 'La fille noire, cette "victime"', *Tam-Tam*, v (1956), 10-13; Pika, 'La mode féminine: l'habit fait-il le moine?' *La semaine de l'A.E.F.* (31 Jan. 1953); Raphaël Boubala, 'Les jeunes filles et la mode', *Liaison*, XXI-XXII (1952), 11-12; Madelaine M'Bombo, 'La voix d'une femme courageuse', *Liaison*, xxxix (1953), 16-17.

⁹⁰ François Mosingue, 'Un des grands problèmes', 33.

⁹¹ 'L'élection de Miss Poto-Poto', *France-Équateur*, 4 May 1957; 'L'élection de la Miss Africaine', *France-Équateur*, 6 May 1957.

Amba, mwana ya mama,
Ayei kobondela Polo,
Polo abondela, polo asomba *djiguida*,

Somba e somba *djiguida*,
Ayoki Victoria akei kosomba *djiguida*.

Amba, my dear,
Came to beg Paul,
Begged Paul, so that he could buy
her *djiguida*.

Buy them, buy the *djiguida*,
She heard Victoria's beat and went
to buy *djiguida*.⁹²

Fashion was thus an important element in debates over such fundamental issues as male-female relations, bride-wealth, marriage, family and the role of women in society.⁹³ Similar discussions were taking place about the same time in the English-language press of East and Central Africa.⁹⁴

Perhaps the most celebrated association of contested clothing, which continues into the present, is that of young men of Bacongo. Today, hundreds of young men live in their own closed society based on their love of clothes. These 'dandies' and their 'cult of elegance' have been the subject of two books and several articles.⁹⁵ Since the 1960s, the *sapeurs*, as they call themselves, have used fashion as a way of disengaging themselves from those in power and of expressing their social alienation. To be a '*sapeur*' is to be a member of *La société des ambianceurs et des personnes élégantes*.⁹⁶ Not only does this way of life mean wearing expensive, elegant clothes bought in Paris, but it also involves belonging to a society with its own rules and values. For a present-day young *sapeur* to travel to France is a rite of passage absolutely necessary for personal advancement. An individual may spend years gathering suitcases of finery that fit the 'cool' *sapeur* style, before returning to Bacongo where the clothes are displayed at social gatherings in favourite bars. In ritual-like dances, young men show off the brand names on their clothes and admire those of other dancers. One member stated that 'it is a way of living, a state of mind'.⁹⁷

Sapeur roots, according to men interviewed by Justin-Daniel Gandoulou, a Congolese sociologist, go back into the post-war period when veterans returned to Brazzaville with money and fashion ideas. In the 1950s, students returning from Paris also joined in the discussion of fashion. It was a student who suggested the name, 'Existos' (or 'Existentialists'), for a celebrated mutual aid association based on an appreciation of elegant and sometimes unusual clothing. Another club was called 'Cabaret'. Unlike the present-day

⁹² Paul Kamba, 'Djiguida' (Ngoma 275).

⁹³ In its history from 1950 to 1959, the journal, *Liaison*, published many articles and letters on these topics.

⁹⁴ Audrey Wipper, 'African women, fashion, and scapegoating', *Can. J. Afr. Studies*, vi (1972), 329-49.

⁹⁵ Justin-Daniel Gandoulou, *Entre Paris et Bacongo* (Paris, 1984), and *Dandies à Bacongo*. See also Jonathan Friedman, 'The political economy of elegance: an African cult of beauty', *Culture and History*, vii (1990), 101-25; Mireille Duteil, 'Congo: travail de "sape"', *Le Monde* (13 March 1989); Jane Rouch, 'Les dandys de Brazzaville', *Le Matin Weekend* (6 April 1984).

⁹⁶ 'La sape' is a French slang word meaning clothing with the added connotation of elegance and high fashion. The '*sapeurs*' took the word and made it an acronym for their 'society'.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Mireille Duteil, 'Congo: travail de "sape"'. The two books by Gandoulou which are based on interviews with '*sapeurs*' give a good sense of this 'way of life and state of mind'.



Fig. 8. Mural of a contemporary couple outside a bar-café, Brazzaville, 1987.
Source: Clichés Florent Massoumou/GRILAN.

sapeurs, who are unemployed and socially marginalized, the founders of the movement were employed, some of them working as civil servants. Furthermore, their clothes were made by local tailors rather than bought overseas, although the expense of buying the best cloth and taking it to the most talented and renowned tailor was considerable. Their extravagance was fiercely criticized in *Liaison* by those who held conflicting social values. An article on the theme, 'clothes do not make a man', castigated a young man who earned 7000–8000 francs per month yet ordered a suit for 7000 francs and two pairs of leather shoes for 6000 francs. The writer pointed out the large number of simple, good clothes that might have been bought for the same price, with enough left over to support the individual and his family. He went on to claim that such excesses drove young men into debt and fraudulent activities. Altogether, they were insidious role models for schoolboys who dreamed of dressing like their older brothers.⁹⁸ Another claimed that it was only a 'stage' through which young people had to pass and that the critics should not overdramatize youthful excesses.⁹⁹

CONCLUSION

Modern-day *sapeurs* fully acknowledge their line of inspiration from the past. In an interview with a French radio station, one young man was asked why he and his friends had such a fascination for fine clothes. He replied that 'we are born like that. My father was like that, my grandfather also. We can only

⁹⁸ Jean Etho, 'L'habit ne fait pas le moine', *Liaison*, xxxviii (1953), 26; also see the discussion of Sylvain Bemba, 'Face à son destin, la jeunesse du Moyen Congo est-elle prête à assurer la relève?' *Liaison*, LIX (1957), 12–14.

⁹⁹ Bemba, 'Face à son destin', 13–15.



Fig. 9. Mural of contemporary locally tailored women's clothing, Brazzaville, 1987. Source: Clichés Florent Massoumou/GRILAN.

be like them'. He went on to compare his love of clothes to the acquisition of language, explaining to the interviewer 'no one ever taught you French, for you were born into a society which spoke French and you were obliged to speak it. If I am dressed in this manner, it is because my father was like that'.¹⁰⁰ The *sapeur's* explanation was, of course, accurate in its historical perspectives, for the appreciation of fashion and finery has deep roots in Congolese society. They are only longer than the young man realized and have many more twists and turns.

The association of power and wealth with dress and display that existed in pre-colonial times thus persisted in the colonial period. Clothing became more widespread throughout the population, and new ideas were introduced by foreigners and embellished by townspeople. Their range of choices and the freedom to choose intensified the debate over fashion. In their appreciation of the powerful symbolism of clothes and the significance of outward appearances in mediating social relations, Brazzavillois were perpetuating a tradition that had existed for centuries in Central African

¹⁰⁰ Gandoulou, *Dandies à Baongo*, 11.

societies. The *sapeurs*, who have appropriated fashion as a means of asserting their position in society, have not departed from the old tradition, they have merely stood it on its head. Through displaying their unique stylishness in a 'cult of elegance', they contest and conceal their social marginalization as their ancestors once used cloth, jewellery and insignia to confirm and display their power.

SUMMARY

The significance of dress in mediating social relations was deeply rooted in the Central African experience. In pre-colonial times, clothing, jewellery and insignia conveyed identity, status, values and a sense of occasion. Those with access to European trade cloth and second-hand clothes integrated them into their dress. Central Africans had a strong sense of the "politics of costume" long before new sources and ideas of clothing arrived with colonialism.

Brazzaville, the capital of French Equatorial Africa, then became the scene of opportunity, experimentation and choice. Foreign workers from West Africa, the French Antilles and the Central African coastal regions pioneered new styles which were quickly appropriated and adapted by other townspeople. Europeans, in their attire, also seemed to confirm the importance of dress and were a model for those who considered themselves *évolués*. In handing out clothing, European employers and missionaries had their own agenda, which was rejected by many townspeople as an autonomous fashion sense developed in Bacongo and Poto-Poto, the African districts of Brazzaville. With an entrenched monetary economy, cloth and clothing became widely available to all with cash. Styles, costs and values became issues of contention. Clothing not only symbolized change but became a vehicle for change.

In the late colonial period, the sources allow a deeper understanding of the relationship of dress to controversial social issues. Clothing became an arena for contesting and asserting class, gender and generational roles.